

Metempsychosis

IF we except the belief of a future remuneration beyond this life for suffering virtue, and retribution for successful crimes, there is no system so simple, and so little repugnant to our understanding, as that of the metempsychosis. The pains and the pleasures of this life are by this system considered as the recompense or the punishment of our actions in an anterior state: so that, says St. Foix, we cease to wonder that among men and animals, some enjoy an easy and agreeable life, while others seem born only to suffer all kinds of miseries. Preposterous as this system may appear, it has not wanted for advocates in the present age, which indeed has revived every kind of fanciful theories. Mercier, in *L'an deux mille quatre cents quarante*, seriously maintains the present one.

If we seek for the origin of the opinion of the metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls into other bodies, we must plunge into the remotest antiquity; and even then we shall find it impossible to fix the epoch of its first author. The notion was long extant in Greece before the time of Pythagoras. Herodotus assures us that the Egyptian priests taught it; but he does not inform us of the time it began to spread. It probably followed the opinion of the immortality of the soul.

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As soon as the first philosophers had established this dogma, they thought they could not maintain this immortality without a transmigration of souls. The opinion of the metempsychosis spread in almost every region of the earth; and it continues, even to the present time, in all its force amongst those nations who have not yet embraced Christianity. The people of Arracan, Peru, Siam, Camboya, Tonquin, Cochin-China, Japan, Java, and Ceylon, still entertain that fancy, which also forms the chief article of the Chinese religion. The Druids believed in transmigration. The bardic triads of the Welsh are full of this belief; and a Welsh antiquary insists that by an emigration, which formerly took place, it was conveyed to the Bramins of India from Wales! The Welsh bards tell us that the souls of men transmigrate into the bodies of those animals whose habits and characters they most resemble, till after a circuit of such penitential miseries, they are purified for the celestial presence; for man may be converted into a pig or a wolf, till at length he assumes the inoffensiveness of the dove.

My learned friend Sharon Turner, the accurate and philosophical historian of our Saxon ancestors, has explained, in his "Vindication of the ancient British

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Poems," p. 231, the Welsh system of the metempsychosis. Their bards mention three circles of existence. The circle of the all-inclosing circle holds nothing alive or dead, but God. The second circle, that of felicity, is that which men are to pervade after they have passed through their terrestrial changes. The circle of evil is that in which human nature passes through those varying stages of existence which it must undergo before it is qualified to inhabit the circle of felicity.

The progression of man through the circle of evil is marked by three infelicities: Necessity, oblivion, and deaths. The deaths which follow our changes are so many escapes from their power. Man is a free agent, and has the liberty of choosing; his sufferings and changes cannot be foreseen. By his misconduct he may happen to fall retrograde into the lowest state from which he had emerged. If his conduct in any one state, instead of improving his being, had made it worse, he fell back into worse condition to commence again his purifying revolutions. Humanity was the limit of the degraded transmigrations. All the changes above humanity produced felicity. Humanity is the scene of the contest, and after man his traversed every state of animated existence, and can remember all that he has passed through, that consummation follows which he attains in the cir-

cle of felicity. It is on this system of transmigration that Taliessin, the Welsh bard, who wrote in the sixth century, gives a recital of his pretended transmigrations. He tells how he had been a serpent, a wild ass, a buck, or a crane, &c.; and this kind of reminiscence of his former state, this recovery of memory, was a proof of the mortal's advances to the happier circle. For to forget what we have been was one of the curses of the circle of evil. Taliessin therefore, adds Mr. Turner, as profusely boasts of his recovered reminiscence as any modern sectary can do of his state of grace and election.

In all these wild reveries there seems to be a moral fable in the notion, that the clearer a man recollects what a *brute* he has been, it is a certain proof that he is in an improved state!

According to the authentic Clavigero, in his history of Mexico, we find the Pythagorean transmigration carried on in the west, and not less fancifully than in the countries of the east. The people of Tlascala believe that the souls of persons of rank went after their death to inhabit the bodies of *beautiful and sweet singing birds*, and those of the *nobler quadrupeds*; while the souls of inferior persons were supposed to pass into *weasels, beetles*, and such other *meaner animals*.

There is something not a little ludicrous in the description Plutarch gives at the close of his treatise on “the delay of heavenly justice.” Thespesius saw at length the souls of those who were condemned to return to life, and whom they violently forced to take the forms of all kinds of animals. The labourers charged with this transformation forged with their instruments certain parts; others, a new form; and made some totally disappear; that these souls might be rendered proper for another kind of life and other habits. Among these he perceived the soul of Nero, which had already suffered long torments, and which stuck to the body by nails red from the fire. The workmen seized on him to make a viper of, under which form he was now to live, after having devoured the breast that had carried him.—But in this Plutarch only copies the fine reveries of Plato.